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February 26, 2007
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL EDUCATION COMMITTEE MEMBERS EDUCATE CONGRESS

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Willie Tracey Jr. (Ganado/Kinlichee), Navajo Nation Council Education committee member, said he and fellow Navajo educational leaders met with key Bureau of Indian Affairs Educational and Congressional representatives to educate each on Navajo educational needs and deliver Intergovernmental Relations-approved appropriations requests during mid-February.

Dr. Tommy Lewis, Superintendent of the Department of Diné Education, and members of the Navajo Education and School Board accompanied the educational committee members to educate the congressional representatives about the Navajo educational needs and appropriations requests.

“The Federal Government’s funding for Indian Education must achieve ‘adequate yearly progress’ if Navajo schools are to meet the No Child Left Behind standards which means funding must increase by substantially more than the inflation rate,” Tracey said.

The average inflation rate in 2006 was 3.24 percent. To maintain current services funding must increase by greater than 3.24 percent. Although even that does not take into account population growth, which is very high in the Native American population, or the fact that Native American schools start at a deficit compared to most other schools.

“Among the many requests we presented was one for the Department of Diné Education,” Tracey said.

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Today, Navajo students face unusually great challenges uncommon to non-Indian communities. Unemployment on the Navajo Nation hovers around 40 percent much higher than the national unemployment rate during the Great Depression. With limited economic opportunity, a high crime rate, an increase in gang activity and the use of such devastating drugs as methamphetamine, the typical Navajo student must be firmly grounded to succeed. To address underperforming schools and to increase Navajo student performance, the Navajo Nation established the Diné Department of Education in 2005. This Tribal Department of Education is responsible for ensuring a culturally supportive, high-standard education for all Navajo students.

The Navajo representatives also discussed the No Child Left Behind Act that is considered for reauthorization this year. Many aspects of the Act are deserving of praise, but adjustments need to be made for it to work better on the Navajo Nation, including providing enough resources to meet its standards.

“We informed the Congress that the Navajo Nation is developing recommendations for modifications to No Child Left Behind Act and asked that the Congress hold a field hearing on the Navajo Nation regarding its reauthorization,” Tracey added.

In an effort to ensure equity among different Native American tribes, the Navajo Nation Council Education Committee members also asked for equal treatment for tribes under the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act. Under FERPA, State education departments can access student data for research and evaluation purposes, but tribal education departments cannot. FERPA should be amended to apply equally to both state and tribal education departments; with both having the same rights and the same responsibilities. Without this data, it is impossible for the Diné Department of Education to evaluate student achievement and develop and implement plans for improvements.

The committee members also expressed support for the position of the National Indian Head Start Directors Association for a 4 percent set aside for Indian Head Start as part of the Head Start Act reauthorization. This is a critically important program serving a vulnerable segment of our communities.

Lastly, the committee thanked members of Congress for their support for passage of the Esther Martinez Native Language Preservation Act of 2006.

“Preserving language is critical to the survival of our culture and closely linked to the success of our students,” Tracey said.

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By the Treaty of 1868, the Navajo Nation Agreed to Accept Federal Teachers and the Federal Government agreed to supply them. Specifically, “the United States [agreed] that, for every thirty [Navajo] children between said ages [6-16] who can be induced or compelled to attend school, a house shall be provided, and a teacher competent to teach the elementary branches of an English education shall be furnished, who will reside among said Indians, and faithfully discharge his or her duties as a teacher....”

“The BIA-funded and public school systems on the Navajo Nation today are the direct result of this treaty provision,” Willie noted. “Yet, the federal government has not fully lived up to its obligations under the treaty and its trust responsibility to fund these schools adequately.”